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SUBJECT: FINLAND: EMBASSY PARTICIPATES IN ORTHODOX CHURCH
SEMINAR ON HUMAN TRAFFICKING

1. (U) Poloff David Schlaefer spoke at a conference on trafficking-in-persons organized by the Finnish Orthodox Church on April 11 in Joensuu, Finland. The Finnish Orthodox Church and Evangelical Lutheran Church are both recognized as official state churches by the GoF. Although only around 2% of Finns are practicing Orthodox (approximately 60,000-70,000 people), the Church maintains an influential role in Finnish politics and society and has actually seen modest growth in recent years, whereas the dominant Lutheran Church (over 80% of Finns are Lutheran) has experienced a decline during the same period. The Joensuu seminar was held at the Finnish Orthodox Seminary in Northern Karelia near the Russian border, an area with a large Orthodox population. Increased attention to trafficking-in-persons in the Nordic-Baltic region prompted the Church to organize the seminar to explore the Church's role and responsibilities as the EU expands and issues such as trafficking, refugees, migratory pressures, etc., become more severe.

Emphasis on the Victim

2. (U) Poloff spoke to the group of about 40 clergy, activists, and seminary students about the importance of crafting an approach to trafficking in persons that focuses victim assistance and victim's rights. Poloff emphasized that internationally accepted definitions of trafficking recognized that coercion could occur at any point of the process; even if a woman entered a country willingly to work as a prostitute, if an element of coercion was later employed by her handlers to exploit her for commercial gain and secure her continued acquiescence, then a trafficking dynamic existed. The fact that Finland's new National Action Plan recognized this and promoted a victim-centered approach to the issue was a significant step forward for Finland. Poloff told the group that governments alone would never be able to stop human trafficking, and provided examples of state-NGO partnerships that had made effective use of complementary strengths and resources to combat TIP. Poloff suggested that it was in the area of victim assistance that institutions like the Orthodox Church could play an important role in the Nordic-Baltic region in fighting trafficking.

3. (U) Finland's Speaker of Parliament, Paavo Lipponen, also addressed the conference and led a discussion about trafficking in Finland and the broader Nordic-Baltic region. Lipponen told the participants that the United States had been right in the past when criticizing Finland's approach to trafficking through its annual TIP report. He said that Finns had not believed that trafficking was an issue in their country since there are no "sex districts" as are found in some other countries and the phenomenon was invisible to the general public. However, he said that Finland now recognized that a problem existed and would continue to exist since "Finland's neighborhood" was not going to change and countries like Russia would continue to provide opportunities for traffickers to exploit poor women. Lipponen praised Finland's interagency TIP working group, and said that implementation of the country's new National Action Plan should be given the highest priority. He also said that the GoF and institutions like the Church needed to address the phenomenon of Finns going abroad to engage in "sex tourism," a practice that aided traffickers and hurt the women involved.

Conclusions

4. (U) The general discussion that followed the presentations suggested that the Orthodox Church, perhaps in partnership with the Evangelical Lutheran Church, should develop an action plan at the regional level to assist governments and non-governmental organizations in combating trafficking. Swedish Bishop Ragnar Svensrud said that the Orthodox Church's conservative positions on issues such as immigration and migration should not stand in the way of recognizing that the "free movement of goods and people" would have an ever greater affect on Europe, and that the Church had an inherent moral responsibility to assist the most vulnerable in society, including trafficking victims. There was also an extended discussion of the Church's role (if any) in countering a secular permissiveness that contributed to Finnish (and other) European men believing

that there was nothing morally wrong in frequenting brothels in "Thailand or Amsterdam or Estonia," despite the fact that the women they visited, whether trafficked or not, were still victims of an exploitation that would scar most of them mentally and physically for life. The difficulty of addressing moral issues in general in a postmodern secular Europe was cited as a challenge for the Church in grappling with issues like trafficking.

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